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LANGUAGE LEARNING AND THE TEACHING PROCESS.

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THE TEACHING OF THE NATIVE LANGUAGE CAN BE DIVIDED INTO THREE MAJOR MODES--THE PRESCRIPTIVE, THE DESCRIPTIVE, AND THE PRODUCTIVE. PRESCRIPTIVE TEACHING PROCEEDS FROM TWO (SUSPECT) ASSUMPTIONS--(1) THAT THERE ARE ABSOLUTE STANDARDS UNANIMOUSLY KNOWN AND SHARED BY EDUCATED ADULTS, TO WHICH A STUDENT'S LANGUAGE SHOULD ATTAIN, AND (2) THAT PRESCRIPTIVE TEACHER INTERVENTION IN LANGUAGE PATTERNS OF ADOLESCENTS OR CHILDREN OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AGE CAN EFFECT SIGNIFICANT CHANGE. DESCRIPTIVE TEACHING DESCRIBES HOW LANGUAGE WORKS, ITS NATURE, AND ITS HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS. SOME LANGUAGE SUBJECT MATTERS THAT CAN BE APPROACHED DESCRIPTIVELY ARE GRAMMAR, LEXICOGRAPHY, SEMANTICS, LANGUAGE HISTORY, DIALECTOLOGY, AND THE PROCESS OF COMPOSITION. PRODUCTIVE TEACHING, WHICH OVERLAPS MARKEDLY WITH THE DESCRIPTIVE MODE, IS DESIGNED TO EXTEND THE STUDENT'S EFFECTIVE USES OF THE NATIVE LANGUAGE, TO MAKE HIS LANGUAGE STYLES--BOTH WRITTEN AND ORAL--ADAPTABLE TO A WIDE RANGE OF POSSIBLE AUDIENCES. WHICHEVER MODE A TEACHER PREFERS, THE MOST POWERFUL AND SUCCESSFUL LANGUAGE TEACHING REQUIRES (1) A FORMIDABLE SUBSTANTIVE COMMAND OF THE DISCIPLINE OF LANGUAGE, (2) A KNOWLEDGE OF THE NATURE OF BOTH LEARNER AND TEACHER, AND THEIR INTERACTIONS, AND (3) CERTAIN PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES, PARTICULARLY FLEXIBILITY, WHICH LET HIM MOVE FREELY AMONG THE MODES. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "ELEMENTARY ENGLISH," VOL. 44 (OCTOBER 1967), 602-608, 709.) (MM)

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Aileen Fisher: Like Nothing at All
English Teacher Preparation Study
Language Learning and Teaching
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JANET ANN EMIG

Language Learning and the Teaching Process

The British linguists Halliday, McIntosh, and Strevens divide the teaching of the native language into three major modes. These they call (1) the prescriptive, (2) the descriptive, and (3) the productive teaching of language.[1] This discussion will emanate from their distinction. I believe that most teachers engage in all modes when they teach the native language, although their exemplifying of each and their apportioning of time among the three modes vary stunningly. I also believe that this apportioning exemplifies in part the philosophy of language of a teacher, a department chairman, or indeed, of anyone who shapes the curriculum in a school or school system.

Prescriptive teaching of language is the mode many linguists would regard as the least interesting and significant. Prescriptive teaching involves teaching children to replace language patterns which are regarded as unacceptable with other patterns that are regarded as acceptable. As with the other two approaches, prescriptive teaching of language can deal with either or both oral and written modes of discourse. Dialect I will use throughout my discussion as one example of oral discourse to which any three of the approaches can be applied.

If a teacher proceeds prescriptively, he treats the student's original dialect as inadequate, inaccurate, illiterate, or just plain cussed and wrong-headed. He often makes statements of the following sort: "John, you must sound the *g* in *ing* at the end of words. Educated people always do. Don't say *singin'*; say sing*ing* if you want to sound and be educated. Dropping your *g's* is just sheer laziness and indifference." Or: "Educated people never say 'You is,' or 'They is, Millicent'; Say 'You are'; 'They are.'" It is, incidentally, this kind of teaching that leads to one of two reactions almost all of us have experienced at any cocktail party or for many square miles around any NCTE convention. Query; "You one of those English teachers?" Reaction 1: "I'd better watch what I say." Reaction 2: "Oh!" Then the lapse into total silence.

A certain kind of evaluation of student themes qualifies as an example of prescriptive teaching directed toward the child's written language. It involves positively profligate use of margins, backs of pages, and even whole extra sheets of paper where the prescriptive teacher makes such mute imprecations as *awk! wc!* and *dang part!*

Both of these examples—indeed, all examples of prescriptive teaching—proceed from at least two hidden assumptions that are, to say it as gently as possible, suspect. The first is that there are absolute standards, which are known and unanimously shared by educated adults, to which a student's oral and written language should attain. The standards in the case of child's oral language might be—if the student is

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[1]Michael A. K. Halliday, Angus McIntosh, and Peter Strevens, *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965, Chapter 7.

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lucky—the style of Huntley-Brinkley or Walter Cronkite, depending on the teacher's network loyalty; or if he is unlucky—that of Gladstone or William Pitt, or even Demothenes—in translation, of course.

The standards in the case of the child's written language might be the immortal prose of the Harbrace Handbook or, if the teacher is sufficiently anachronistic, the essays of Gibbon or Sir Thomas Browne. My reason for reaching into the past for models of excellence is that prescriptive teachers do, when they are not proceeding from negative instances à la Lindley Murray and other sterling school grammarians. Often there is not even a specific model or era in mind so that the teachers, when pressed, just lyricize over some Golden Age of perfect language—with time and place carefully unspecified.

A second assumption in prescriptive teaching is that prescriptive teacher intervention can effect significant changes in oral and written language patterns of late adolescents, of early adolescents, or even of elementary children. One wonders if teachers who proceed wholly prescriptively have read any recent research on the child's initial acquisition of language. Take these three quotations:

The first is from a summary of research on language development by the psycholinguists Susan Ervin and Wick Miller:

> What material is available suggests that by the age of four most children have learned the fundamental structural features of their language and many of the details.[2]

The second is by the psychologist John B. Carroll:

> By the age of about six, the average child has mastered nearly all its common grammatical forms and constructions—at least those used by the adults and older children in his environment. After the age of six there is relatively little in the grammar or syntax of the language that the average child needs to learn, except to achieve a school-imposed standard of speech or writing to which he may not be accustomed in his home environment. Vocabulary learning, however, continues until late in adult life.[3]

And here is the linguist Martin Joos in his essay "Language and the School Child":

> It [learning the grammatical system of the native language] is complete—and the books are closed on it!—at about eight years of age. It is not normal to learn any more grammar beyond that age.[4]

Let's combine these statements by linguists for a moment with the thesis developed with convincing data by the psychologist Benjamin Bloom in his study *Stability and Change in Human Characteristics*.[5] Bloom's thesis is that certain human characteristics are increasingly impervious to change with increasing chronological age. Language is strongly implied as a cluster of characteristics especially impervious to change. Bloom means through any form of intervention, of which I believe prescriptive teaching to be a powerful instance.

There are assumptions not only about the nature of language but about the nature of learning and teaching in prescriptive teaching of language [indeed, in all three modes]. For a moment let me make these explicit for prescriptive teaching.

The psychologist Jacob Getzels has de-

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[2]Susan M. Ervin and Wick R. Miller, "Language Development," *Child Psychology*, Sixty-Second Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 125.

[3]John B. Carroll, "Language Development," *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1960, p. 748.

[4]Martin Joos, "Language and the School Child," *Language and Learning*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1966, p. 205.

[5]Benjamin S. Bloom, *Stability and Change in Human Characteristics*. New York: John Wiley, 1964.

vised a very useful set of distinctions about teaching and learning which might be called "Knowledge, Knowledge, Who's Got the Knowledge?" There are four possible situations: The first—and this order is arbitrary—is that the teacher knows something which the student does not. A second is that both teacher and student know something. A third is that the student knows something the teacher does not. A fourth, of course, is that neither knows.

Each of these situations I'd like to suggest requires a different role or set of roles for both teacher and learner. Prescriptive teaching is, I think, clearly and wholly an example of a situation where the teacher knows something the student doesn't (since there is often no match in his own experience). One way to put the relation between teacher and student is the classic metaphor of student as pitcher, to be filled with a new oral or written dialect. What would be the role of teacher here? Teacher as water carrier or—if the teaching were for some reason reported on the society page, the article would begin, "Miss Fidditch poured."

If one preferred a more active metaphor for prescriptive teaching, the teacher of course could become sculptor with the student here a raw lump of clay to be pummeled finally into a member of the English-Speaking Union. Perhaps the most accurate metaphor from what I've said thus far about prescriptive teaching might be teacher as Sisyphus with the student as stone, rolling relentlessly down the hill again.

The wholly prescriptive teacher might at this moment be rue-ing "Othello's occupation's gone." He might also be asking, "Are there no components of my student's language still pervious to change at the high school level?" The answer seems to be *perhaps* usage or other specific components in student dialect, if he wants to try.

Several important considerations to note here. First, only tough, systematic, long-term effort will make any change at all. And with constant, carefully programmed drilling. Since what is required here is really teaching a foreign dialect, the teacher who wants to take on the task—and let's leave aside the ethics involved in such a decision—probably should learn the latest techniques in the teaching of a second language, especially the outstanding work in motivation accomplished by the second language teacher.—May I just pause to note the metaphor inherent in this form of prescriptive teaching: which is of course teacher as top sergeant, student as buck private.

The second consideration in deciding what to teach prescriptively is efficiency, or the time-and-motion factor. *If*—and again please note the conditional state of my utterance—the teacher plans to try to change the near-impervious, it is important not to proceed in a scattershot method and deal with all matters of usage or phonology discretely or randomly. There are now excellent studies available of the dialects indigenous to many, if not most, parts of the fifty states. As just three examples, Lee Pederson's work on the dialects of Chicago, William Labov's on New York, and Richard Larson's on Hawaii.[6] If I may be prescriptive, read the appropriate studies for your section of the country; select a brace of phonological and syntactic deviances; and focus on these, excluding all others. In the Chicago dialect, for example, drill on agreement with second person singular and

[6]Lee A. Pederson, "The Pronunciation of English in Metropolitan Chicago: Vowels and Consonants," unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Chicago, 1964; William Labov, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1966; Richard L. Larson, "An Inquiry into Possible Relationships Between the Place of Students' Upbringing and the Characteristics of Their Written and Spoken English," 1966. (in progress).

plural, and third person plural with verbs *to be,* because therein lies one of the most persistent deviances from standard English.

Since the amount of time I spend on a mode may be regarded as a value judgment on how important I think it is, let me move quickly to the second—the descriptive teaching of English.

This is the mode in which descriptions are delineated of how language actually works; its general nature; and, if this can be separated, its specifically human characteristics. Because I think the subject matters and the approaches to them in descriptive teaching are more broad and varied, teachers and students assume a far greater range of roles. I will try to suggest many of these forms of variety in descriptive teaching.

Let's start here with the uniquely human nature of language, as contrasted with animal communication. A description of both can form a fascinating subject matter from grade one through graduate school, with the focus and the sophistication of treatment determining the grade level for presentation. One can imagine a likely discussion in the very early grades of "Can Flipper Talk?" or a consideration in late secondary school or college of certain physiologic correlates with and psychological propensities to language as noted, say, by the physiologist-psychologist Eric Lenneberg.[7] Lenneberg points out, for example, that no animal masters the concepts and principles of language well enough to apply or engage in phonemic analysis, to produce an infinitely large and original set of utterances from his basic stock of sounds, or to impart what Lenneberg calls the "total semantic domain" of word.

A second subject-matter in emphasizing the uniquely human nature of language is a description of how a child initially acquires language. Here, as with specific regional or group dialects, the teacher needs to add reading of current research to observations, and remembrance of how his own children, or babies he knew, acquired language. Some authors here, if you are interested, are Bellugi and Brown; Carroll; Ervin and Miller; and Weir.[8]

Students can learn the basic data about how children learn language by the same route adults follow—that is, by observation systematized by reading, with both supplemented by teacher aid in establishing categories and generalizations. Here teacher and student become field linguists together using as subjects siblings and neighbor children as they answer such questions as "What sounds does a baby make first? When? Why?" "What kinds of responses do babies and small children make when you say a word to them? Why?" "How can you decide when a baby says his first word?" "When do children talk in sentences? What do you mean by sentences?" "What parts of speech do small children learn first? Last? Why?" "Which sex speaks earlier? Why? Later? Why?"

The next subject matter to approach descriptively is grammar. And of course the question becomes "What Grammar?" To answer this question, one needs to establish the criteria for what constitutes a satisfactory description. For me these criteria are the following: A satisfactory descriptive theory of grammar is (1) accurate, (2) comprehensive, (3) elegant, and (4) self-correcting. This means the mode of grammar I teach is the latest version of Noam Chomsky's evolving transformational-gener-

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[7]Eric H. Lenneberg, "A Biological Perspective of Language," *New Directions in the Study of Language.* Cambridge: M. I. T. Press, 1964, pp. 67-68

[8]Ursula Bellugi and Roger Brown, *The Acquisition of Language.* Lafayette, Indiana: Child Development Monograph of the Society for Research in Child Development, 1964; John B. Carroll, *op. cit.;* Susan M. Ervin and Wick R. Miller, *op. cit.;* Ruth H. Weir, *Language in the Crib.* The Hague: Mouton and Company, 1962.

ative grammar as presented in his study, "Aspects of the Theory of Syntax." My choice I do not regard, I must say, as an edict from the dais: it is simply my personal preference for the reason I have cited.

One of the crucial concepts—I might say deep structures—in what I will call *t-g* grammar is that every native speaker, from the time he acquires syntax, possesses a profound intuitive knowledge of his own language. A major question in teaching the native language today is how, when, and why should this knowledge be made explicit and conscious? I cannot within the scope of this paper do more than suggest a few dimensions of this decision.

If Joos is right in saying that a child completes learning the grammar of his language by the time he is age eight—and I think it is clear from the context he means the unconscious mastery—is the child then immediately ready to have this knowledge made conscious and explicit? Should there be a hiatus of a year or two to allow this knowledge to deepen? Should we wait until the age Piaget and Whitehead agree is the age of first coping with formal propositions —that is, between twelve and fourteen? Is a conscious knowledge of grammar necessary or useful at any age? If so, how? Should the teaching be regarded non-pragmatically? That is, grammar is one of the most profound whorls of identifying our humanity, and as a humanistic endeavor, it is self-justifying?

Why teach a student these two kinds of subject matter? To instigate awe in what he has already achieved as a learner. One differentiation between prescriptive-proscriptive, and descriptive and productive teaching of language is the stress. Prescriptive teaching focuses on the miniscule failures—often matters of maturation or socio-economic status—in a student's mastery of language; descriptive and productive, on his fantastic actual and potential attainments. Especially to children who regard themselves as academic failures, there should be enormous assurance and support in the fact that by the time they enter school they have already learned enough to assure their human membership for their lifetime.

What roles do teachers and students assume in this particular segment of the descriptive mode? To return to the Getzels distinction both teachers and students at once know and do not know. The teacher has conscious, explicit, and systematic knowledge of both animal communication and the initial acquisition of language; the child unconscious and implicit. Yet they are in other ways fellow discoverers together. The teacher has another role here—one I mentioned earlier. He is instigator of awe. What is the concomitant role for the learner? He is apprentice in appreciation, of his own accomplishments.

With this descriptive mode of teaching grammar, as with teaching the initial acquisition of language, the teacher may have the role of explicator and organizer. The student then is provider of data: a more classic metaphor here, if you prefer, for teacher in this inductive role is teacher as Socrates; students as his students.

Other phases of language teaching that can be approached descriptively are the teaching of lexicography, semantics, the history of language, and dialectology. Our own teaching imaginations can supply ways of approaching these so as to intrigue the interest and to insure the participation of the students.

All of these segments deal with *oral* phases of language teaching. What opportunities are there for teaching the written language descriptively? The teacher can deal with actual calligraphy, using perhaps such beautiful new sources as *The Art of Writing*, the UNESCO publication available at the last NCTE Convention. The

class can also examine the process of composing. How can this be done given the fragmentary nature of our formal knowledge about how we compose? There are two rich sources: introspection in our own experience; and analysis of other writers' accounts, both student and professional. The two sources can be joined if students are asked to keep a writer's diary in which they describe how they feel about writing they are doing. Did they like the theme assigned or not? Why? If there was no topic assigned, what kind of search did they make for one? How long were they engaged in pre-writing? In what context or environment? If they revised, how long after a draft? What did their revisions consist of?

Professional authors can be approached through the number of analyses by the authors themselves and others of styles of working, of attitudes positive and negative to the act of writing. Anthologies of interviews such as *Writers at Work,* Volumes I and II,[9] and *Counterpoint,* edited by Roy Newquist,[10] present the statements about composing by nearly a hundred professional writers. An article which examines a number of such writers' statements is one I wrote in February, 1964, in the *CCC Journal,* "The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing."

There are also for student examination writers' drafts and revisions—in far greater number than we might suppose. For juniors and seniors, there is a new anthology *Word for Word: A Study of Authors' Alterations, with Exercises,* by Wallace Hildick with segments of revisions from *Middlemarch, Mrs. Dalloway,* and six other selections, along with excellent questions about why certain changes were made.[11]

There are many other sources as well. Two examples are M. R. Ridley's study of the manuscripts connected with the major odes by Keats and Thomas Parkinson's recent study of Yeats, *W. B. Yeats: Later Poetry.*[12]

Some of you might say with this or other parts of what I've described thus far: "I'd call that productive, not descriptive, teaching." Perhaps it is. The categories are not tidy, nor have I suggested—I hope—that there is some kind of mystic matching between certain subject-matters and certain teaching modes.

The productive mode of teaching Halliday, McIntosh, and Strevens describe as helping the student extend the use of his native language in the most effective way. Teachers of course will interpret and implement "in the most effective way" very individualistically. I would like to suggest one or two ways for both oral and written features of discourse. Many British linguists employ a term *register* which some of you might find as useful as I do. It refers to specific realms of language usage, such as the realm of professional jargon or a style directed to a given sort of audience. The emphasis then, in a broad sense, is rhetorical.

The major emphasis in productive teaching of English then might be said to be the extension of student registers, both in oral and written discourse. How might this work with each? Despite protestations and sillinesses I have heard to the contrary, children from a very early age govern features of their oral discourse according to audience. This adjustment, which is sometimes

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[9] *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews,* Malcolm Cowley (ed.), Volume I. New York: Viking Press, Incorporated, 1958; *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews,* Introduction by Van Wyck Brooks, Volume II. New York: Viking Press, Incorporated, 1963.

[10] *Counterpoint,* Roy Newquist (ed.). Chicago: Rand McNally Company, 1964.

[11] Wallace Hildick, *Word for Word: A Study of Authors' Alterations, with Exercises.* New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Incorporated, 1966.

[12] Thomas Parkinson, *W. B. Yeats: Later Poetry.* California: University of California Press, 1966.

called social rather than linguistic awareness, is analogous, I think, to grammatical skill in that it is unconscious and unsystematized, but *there*. Again, as with grammar, the role of the teacher is as explicator; the role of the student is as purveyor or supplier of raw data. Students at all levels can be trained to listen to themselves and others speaking to many kinds of audience, to observe and systematize differences, and eventually to practice specific roles.

They probably need to experience a range of styles. In school too often we teach but few varieties of jargon. One constant example is lexis of whatever critical theory of literature we happen to espouse. We are elaborate in our treatment of the jargons of academe which only some students will ever have to handle, while slighting or forgetting entirely the jargons of the marketplace in which all students will be dealing for significant parts of their future life. One thinks here of the language of advertising, of propaganda—indeed of all forms of slanted writing and talking. A useful study here would be the rhetorics of political movements, such as Civil Rights —the style of a Martin Luther King against the style of a Stokely Carmichael, and both against a Malcolm X. Or the prose of actual campaigners, such as the recent pottage of rhetoric.

Both written and oral targets of productive teaching—indeed of any of the three modes—can I think be approached playfully rather than grimly, with the students engaging in all kinds of autoletics of discourse, trying on different styles and roles, without fear of mature responsibilities or reprisals.

With written discourse this approach can take many guises. Students can imitate a range of stylistic models of their own choosing. They can choose to be for a given assignment Virginia Woolf or Ian Fleming. Some might ask, "How can imitation of models be a form of productive teaching?" Fortunately, we are all such inevitable individualists that perfect and literal imitation is impossible—some cadence or flavor of our own gets into whatever we write, as all of us who have taught modeled writing are well aware.

Or we can watch the transmogrification of a story or other content through the employment of many styles or voices. A new almost-classic source is Raymond Queneau's *Exercices de Style;*[13] another just published is a book by Walker Gibson wonderfully entitled *Tough, Sweet and Stuffy.*[14]

In all these forms of productive teaching we have a double role. We are at once fellow performer and director—Gielguds and Oliviers of our classrooms. Fellow performers because we produce too. We write not only because of the models we hope to set but because of inner compulsions for order and beauty that we at times talk about with our students; directors, because we try to create a context that is safe and free enough that students will find courage to extend their public and private expressions of heart and mind, thinking and feeling.

What kind of teacher does the most powerful and successful teaching of language require?

1) He has formidable substantive command of his discipline of language. If he teaches prescriptively, he has to know what standards he holds and why, as well as the formidable barriers that threaten even a most modest success. If he proceeds descriptively, he must have accurate descriptions of many phenomena involving the general nature of language and of human acquisition of it. This means, ideally, for the pur-

[13] Raymond Queneau, *Exercices de Style.* New York: French and European Publications, Incorporated, 1966.
[14] Walker Gibson, *Tough, Sweet and Stuffy.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966.

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poses of given classroom segments—or to use the chic word, modules—he is a historical linguist; for others, a dialectician; for others, a grammarian. If he proceeds productively, he needs a strong knowledge of processes. If he does not keep this knowledge in his head, he needs to keep it on his book shelves or in a nearby library to which he has ready access.

2) He has knowledge as well about the nature of the learner, of the teacher, as well as repertoire of ways in which they interact. He is aware of implications about learning theory of a given role he may assume and/or ask a student to assume. As important, he has the cluster of strategies to assure he and his students will be playing the role appropriate to the nature of the subject he is teaching, as well as those which enable him to stay in these roles or shift to another as their needs and the requests demand from the subject matter required.

3) Both of these imply a third, a human category. The teacher must possess certain personal attributes that make possible his movement along modes. Clearly, the key attribute here is flexibility. Another —a closing way—to put the matter, he needs an incredibly wide range of registers which he can play like the virtuouso performer the good teacher ideally is.

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